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SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA DIRECTOR DISCUSSES GAZA COVERAGE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH E. LEBARON, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)
)

(C) KEY POINTS

-- Al Jazeera Network Director General Wadah Khanfar told Ambassador on February 10 that Israel's incursion into Gaza was "a ready-made TV show" and that Al Jazeera had achieved "perhaps its highest ratings ever" by relying on an unrivaled network of correspondents and producers to broadcast factual information and images quickly.

-- Al Jazeera attempted to put images in context and provided a perspective on Israel with two correspondents filing reports from there, according to Khanfar.

-- Ambassador pointed out the incongruity of the Qataris' pointing to the Arab street as a call for action, all while the Qatari-funded Al Jazeera's images were whipping up sentiments on the street

-- Khanfar agreed that sentiments were at fever pitch on the Arab street and that al-Jazeera's coverage logically contributed to it. But he tried to counter Ambassador's point by making (the extraneous point) that anger was high in Indonesia and Turkey, too.

-- Khanfar believed that Arab emotions, particularly in the Gulf, ran higher this time than during the war in Lebanon in 2006 because "HAMAS is a Sunni organization that Sunnis could point to and say, 'Look at us, we too are resisting the way Hizbollah (a Shi'i organization) did.'"

(C) COMMENTS

-- Khanfar was clearly pleased with yet another war-time scoop for Al Jazeera. The network's unparalleled financial resources, provided by the Qatari Government, continue to provide the human and technical resources to operate in difficult areas that other networks simply cannot afford to cover so comprehensively.

-- Whatever the Qataris' involvement, Al Jazeera's Gaza coverage has proven once again that, when its broadcasting capabilities coincide with Qatar's active foreign policy, the combination can be potent.

-- This is not intuitively obvious, but, to help improve the USG's image on the Arab street, we need to step up USG senior-level engagement of the Qatari leadership. Better relations with the ruling al-Thani family will translate into changes in al-Jazeera coverage that will gradually help improve the image of the United States in the Arab street.

END KEY POINTS AND COMMENTS

1. (C) Ambassador called on Al Jazeera Director General

Wadah Khanfar on February 10 to hear his views on the network's coverage of Gaza and share the USG's concerns about it. Khanfar explained that Israel's incursion into Gaza was a "ready-made TV show" that Al Jazeera could not afford not to cover 24 hours a day. "Even some Israelis were watching us, especially in the south," he boasted, "because we always had the latest information."

12. (C) The Director General noted that Al Jazeera had four correspondents and 20 producers working in Gaza before the fighting, which created "an unparalleled network." Al Arabiyah, by contrast, had just one correspondent reporting regularly from Gaza and no producers, so its reports, he said, were always packaged, whereas Al Jazeera's were live.

13. (C) "We also had four correspondents in Israel," he stated, "and in every news bulletin, we ran reports from two in Israel and two in Gaza." This, he explained, helped balance perspectives. Al Jazeera introduced a new program called "Opinions from Israel" to highlight the different opinions about the fighting among Israelis.

14. (C) Ambassador argued that showing Israeli "talking heads" or balancing the number of reports was no balance at all, not when on the other side of the scale you are broadcasting graphic images of dead children and urban damage from modern warfare.

15. (C) Khanfar countered that "even if we had given the Israelis 50 percent of the airtime with no images at all, the power of the story was so great that there still would have been an emotional response by the audience." Witnesses

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interviewed by Al Jazeera in Gaza were impossible to balance, he said, but Al Jazeera strived to put things into context by noting casualty numbers, and citing the percentage of homes and buildings that had been hit throughout Gaza, not just in one area.

16. (C) Without conceding the point, Ambassador observed that Al Jazeera's coverage took viewers' emotions and then raised them to a higher level through its coverage. Then Qatari leaders would point to the anger on the Arab street as a call to action. But because Al Jazeera is funded by the Qataris, it forms a vicious cycle leading to more graphic coverage, more emotion, more demonstrations, and then more calls to action.

17. (C) Khanfar tried to counter, saying, extraneously, that demonstrations in Turkey were the largest in 27 years, and that Indonesians had also come out in large numbers, despite the fact that these are not big markets for Al Jazeera.

18. (C) Khanfar denied that there was any political bent within Al Jazeera, because "how would we decide on it, with 22 Arabs in a room?" he asked. He noted that some in the editorial board had disagreed with HAMAS, others with Egypt, so it was impossible to determine and implement one political line in Al Jazeera's broadcasts.

19. (C) The Director General had an alternative theory for the strong level of popular Arab emotion over Gaza: HAMAS, being a Sunni organization, represented the "Sunni resistance." Sunnis could point to HAMAS and say, "finally, we did something, we are resisting the way Hizbollah did," according to Khanfar, who said that this view was particularly strong in the Gulf countries.

110. (C) During the Lebanon war in 2006, Khanfar claimed, "Salafis were calling me all the time, accusing me of supporting Hassan Nasrallah, a Shia; now they are calling me to demand that I show more about Gaza because this is seen as our fight, our victory."
LeBaron